

# Exploring researcher experiences of UK research funding: A survey study

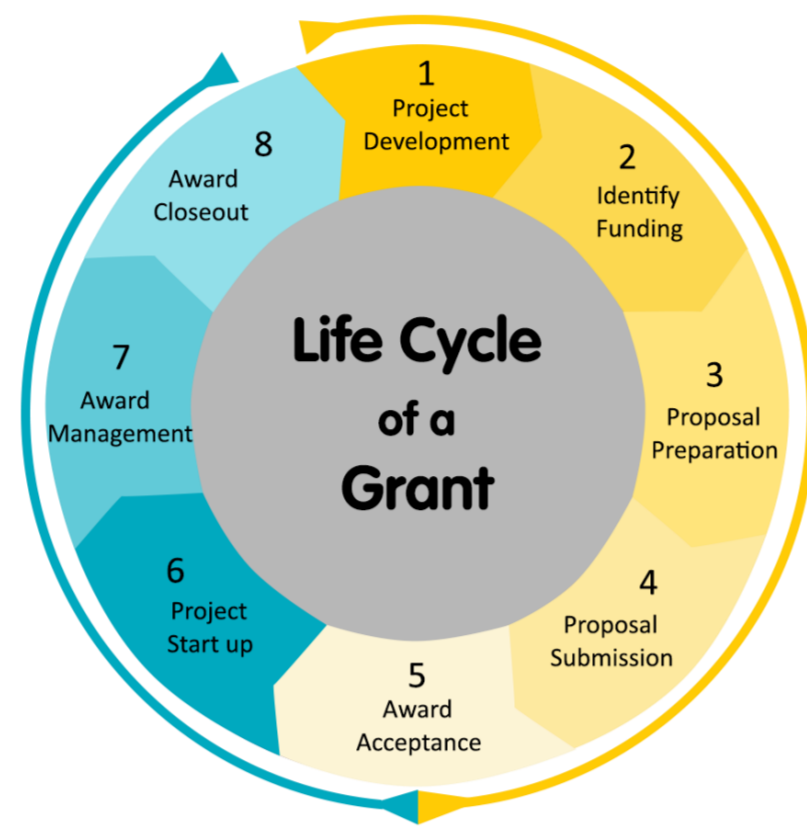
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## BACKGROUND

- Researchers often find they must balance their research, faculty and/or clinical commitments with preparing and submitting funding applications to funders and (if funded) reporting research progress, outputs and impact.<sup>1,2</sup>
- The processes involved in applying for funding and fulfilling reporting requirements are often complex and vary widely between the organisations involved, such as funders, Higher Education Institutions or reporting platforms (e.g. ResearchFish).
- Concerns have been raised around the growth of unnecessary complexity and bureaucracy in research and whether these administrative activities constrain research process, create unnecessary burden and ultimately distract from the core purpose of research; the scientific discovery.<sup>3,4</sup>
- As yet it remains unclear what processes and activities that researchers are required to complete across the end-to-end research lifecycle, and which activities could be regarded as unnecessary, wasteful or have limited value.



**Aim:** To explore researchers' experiences of the processes, effort and burden involved in applying for/obtaining funding and/or fulfilling reporting requirements for UK health and/or social care research funding between Jan 2018 to June 2021.

## METHODS

### Online survey

- Researchers with experience of preparing and submitting any funding applications and/or fulfilling reporting requirements for any funded research between Jan 2018-July 2021.
- Active for fourteen weeks (August – November 2021)

### Recruitment strategy

- Targeted researchers who had applied to the top UK funders of health research based on the UK Health Research Analysis 2018 ([UK Health Research Analysis 2018 - HRC Online](#)) were sent an email invitation
- Publicised on social media

### Survey consisted of 26 open and closed questions in five sections:

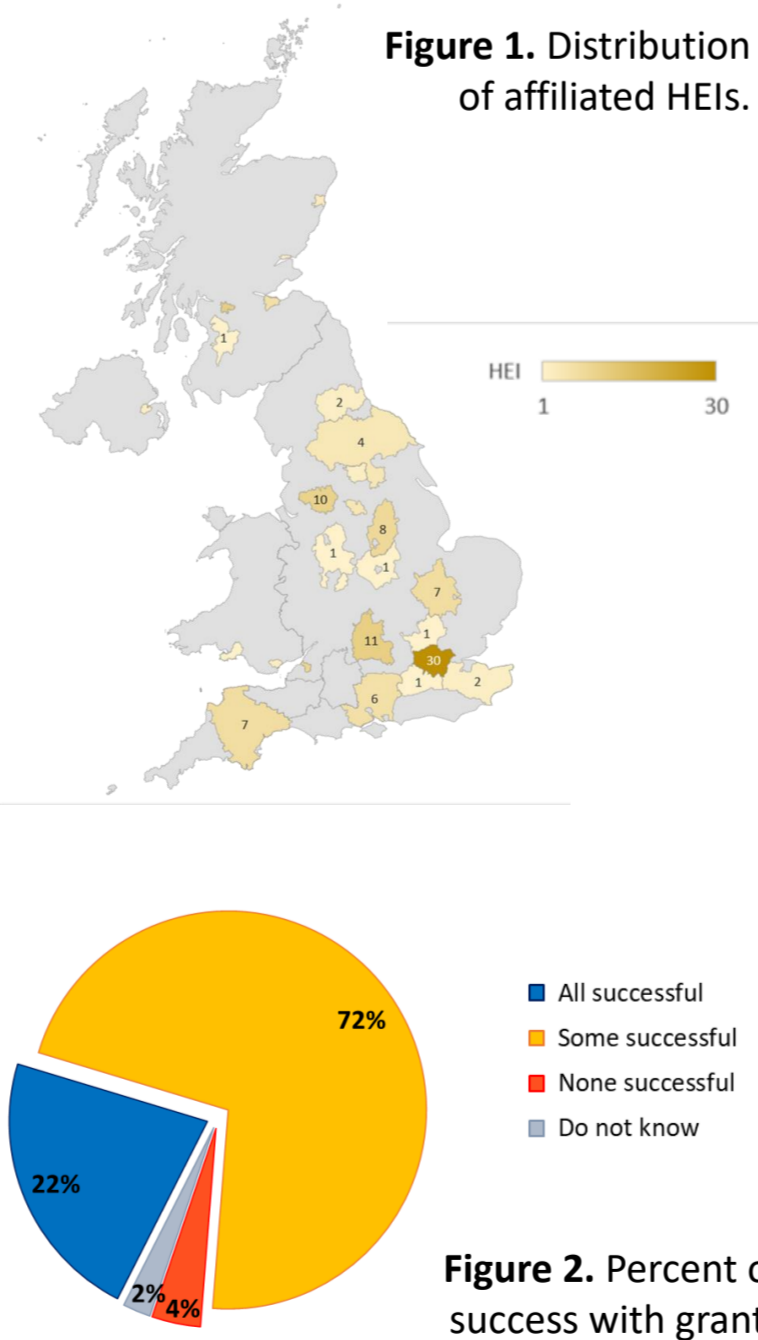
1. Confirmation of experience of funding
2. Characteristics of respondents
3. Experience of funding application processes
4. Experience of fulfilling reporting requirements for funded research
5. Perception of what burden means in relation to application and reporting processes

### Mixed methods analysis



## RESULTS

- Of the 182 respondents, the majority identified as female (61%), white British or, Irish, a senior-career researcher (54%), and were affiliated with HEIs (79%) across the UK (Fig 1).
- **67%** reported submitting between **1 to 5 funding applications**
- **65%** reported fulfilling reporting requirements for **1 to 3 funded research projects**
- **Over 50%** had applied for funding between £151k to £1m and £1.1m to £5m from a range of funding organisations
- Respondents had varying success with funding (Fig 2).



NIHR | National Institute for Health and Care Research 70% | Medical Research Council 38% | Wellcome 27%

## RESULTS

- 176 respondents had **applied for funding** between Jan 2018 and June 2021
- Most respondents completed between **5 and 13 application processes** (Fig 3).
- **70%** felt it was **critically important** to complete each step in application process.

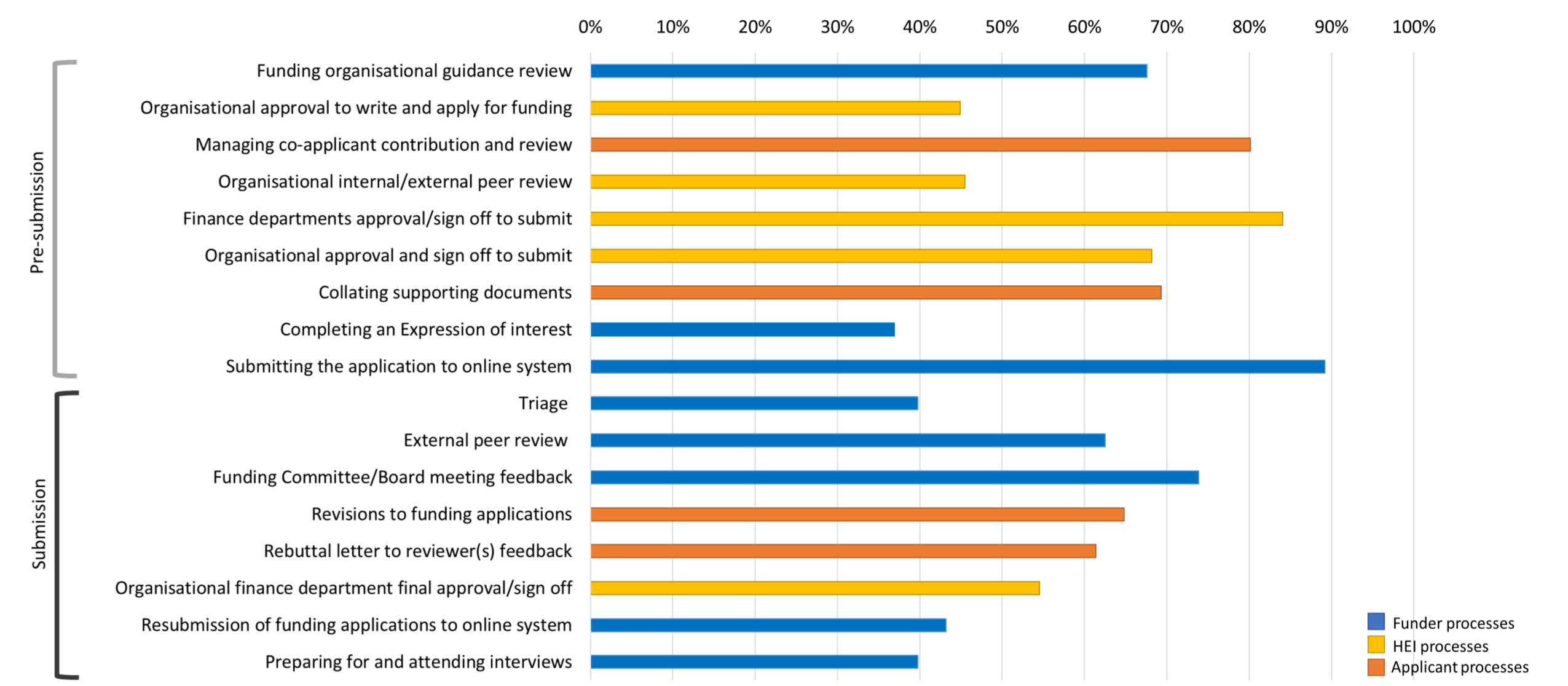


Figure 3. The KEY steps involved in preparing/submitting a funding application according to distribution of responses

- **85%** sought support with application processes (Fig 4).
- Some processes were perceived as time-consuming, burdensome and unnecessary.
- The application process should be streamlined (see Fig 7 for themes).

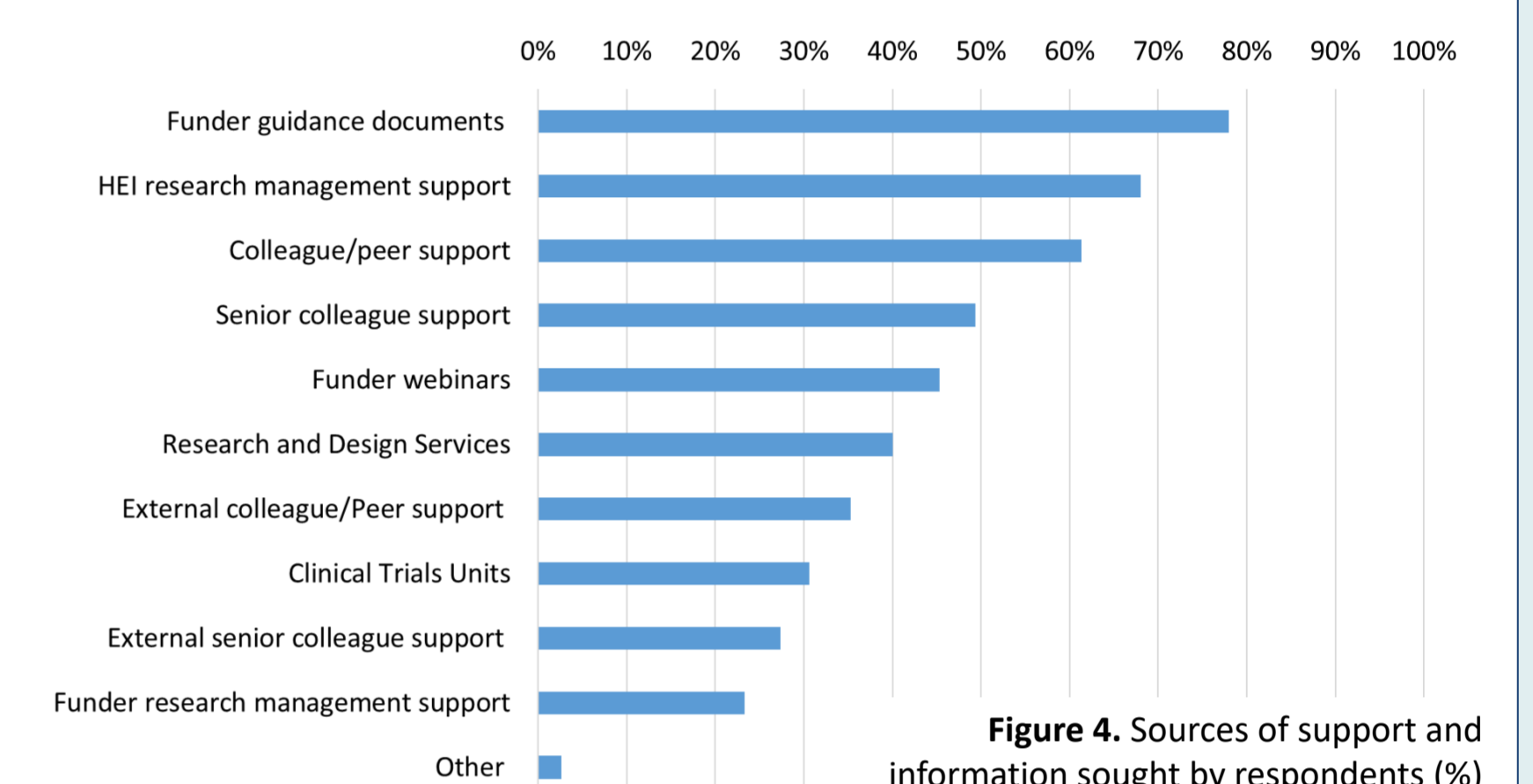


Figure 4. Sources of support and information sought by respondents (%)

- 143 respondents confirmed experience of **fulfilling reporting requirements**
- An average of **17 reports** were submitted across organisations, with funders requiring most reports.
- Only 43% sought support and fulfilling requirements was considered important but not critical (Figs 4 & 5).
- Respondents were unsure how information is used, when and who accesses it.
- The increased workload had substantial consequences on work-life balance (Fig 7).

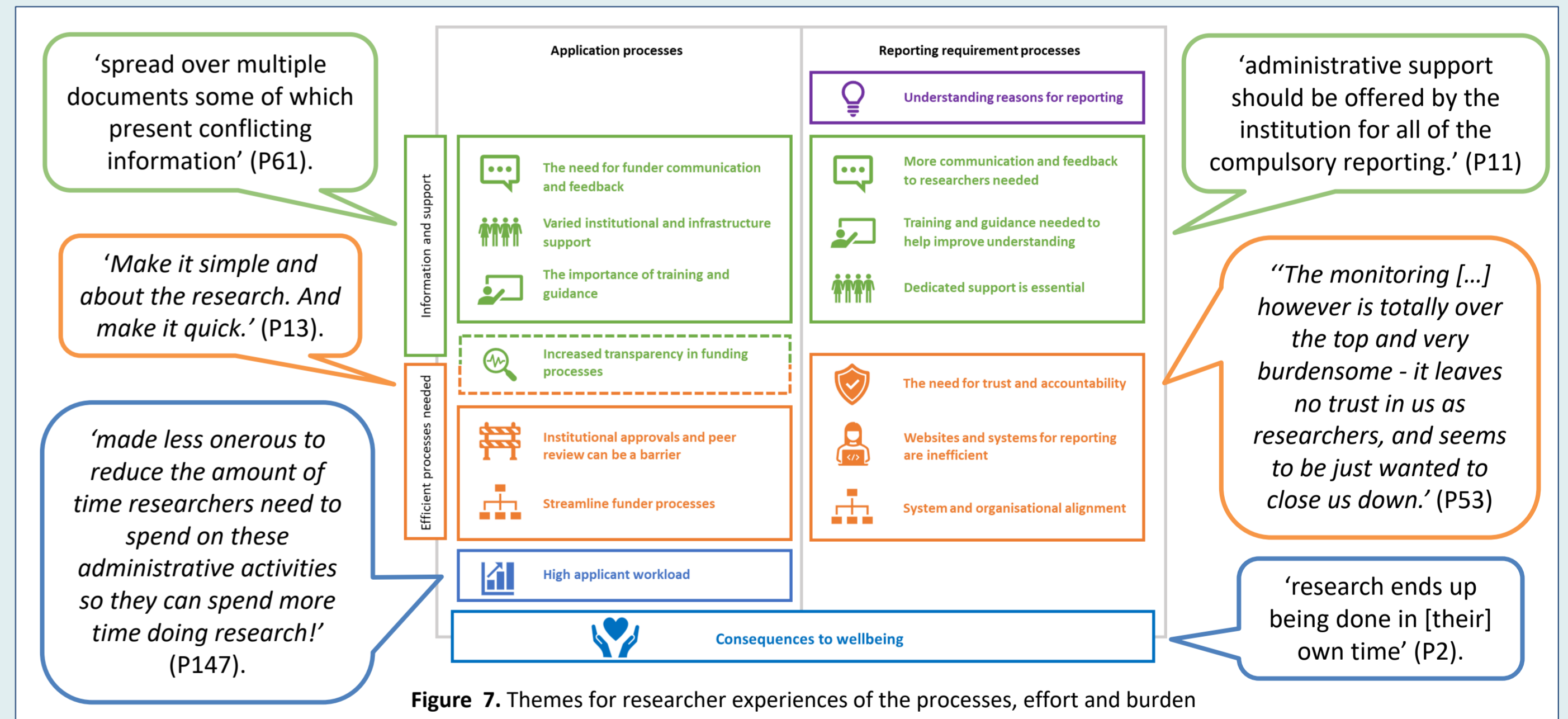
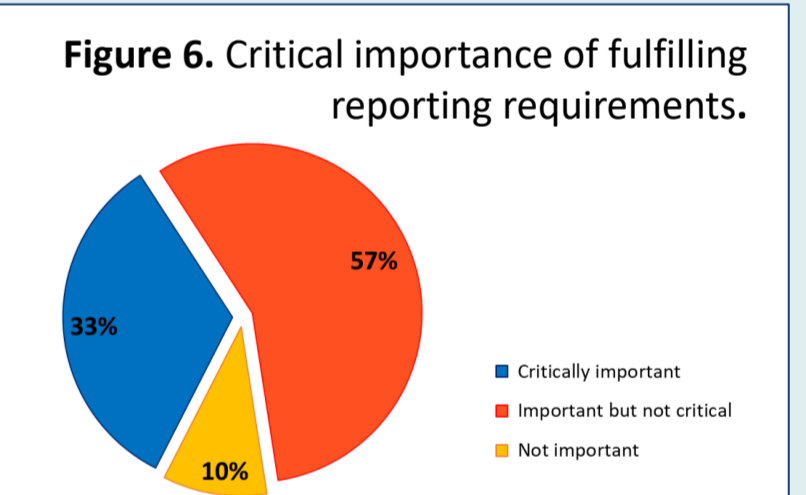
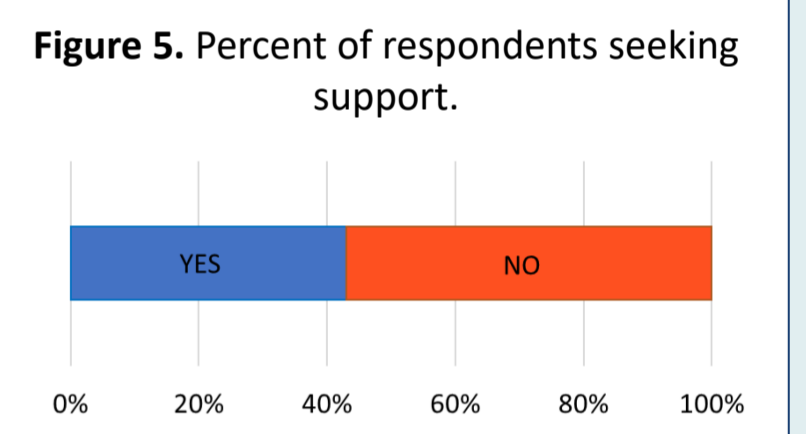


Figure 7. Themes for researcher experiences of the processes, effort and burden

## CONCLUSIONS

- Respondents recognised that time and effort are required and necessary for some processes, especially application processes and those that they felt added value.
- Current application and reporting systems are based on an unbalanced ratio between effort and reward, in which several processes are considered disproportionate, overly complicated and repetitive.
- Increased bureaucracy in research can impact on researcher wellbeing, and work-life balance and resilience is needed to continue working in research.

## REFERENCES

1. University and College Union. Workload is an education issue. UCU workload survey report 2016. 2. Wellcome. What researchers think about the culture they work in. 2020. 3. Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. UK Research and Development Roadmap 2020. 4. Department for Education, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. Reducing bureaucratic burden in research, innovation and higher education. Policy paper. 2020.